Telephone interview with LCDR Jonathan C. Sparks, MSC, USN (Ret.), former commanding officer of 1st Hospital Company, Vietnam, 1966. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Washington, DC, 4 February 2004.

Where did you grow up?

Mostly in northern Alabama, Odonville, a small town about 20 miles north of Birmingham. I went to school in Birmingham. I only went to the 9th grade.

When did you decide you wanted to join the Navy?

I had a very abusive father so I ran away from home when I was 15. As soon as I turned 17 I went back home to get my mother to sign for me to go into the Navy. I joined in August of 1950.

Where did you go to boot camp?

Great Lakes. Then I went to hospital corps school there, too.

Did you decide in boot camp that you wanted to be a corpsman or did they decide for you?

I wanted to be a bulldozer driver. At that time, I was interested in building and construction. Carpenters made $3 dollars an hour but a bulldozer driver made somewhere between $5 and $10 dollars an hour. But when you got out of boot camp then, you went out and stood on the grinder. There were little numbered spots for you to stand on. So you stood there and they would say, "Number 31. You're going to the USS *Lollipop*." And so he'd grab his sea bag and off he'd go.

And, finally, they called everyone except for 10 of us who were left standing there. Finally, a bus came and this third class got out and told us to get on. And off we went to hospital corps school. I had no idea what hospital corps school was. I never even heard of it. And that's how it happened.

When did you graduate from corps school?

I think it was either April or May of '51. Then I went to Naval Hospital Memphis, TN.

Were you a ward corpsman there?

Yes. I worked on the surgery ward. I got into some trouble there and had a captain's mast and got restricted. I was still an HA. They packed me off to Naval Air Station North Island, San Diego.

They thought they would get rid of a trouble-maker.

They did. I was only there about 6 months and got drafted to go to the Fleet Marine Force and Field Med School at Camp Pendleton.

I guess by this time you had learned what the FMF was all about.

I'd heard about it but didn't know much.

Did it come as somewhat of a shock when you learned what it really was?

Oh, yeah. But I have to admit that when I got out of Field Med School I was in really good physical shape. I had on my Marine greens and went back to the dispensary at the Naval Air Station where I had worked so I could impress everyone with how I looked.

Did it work?

Yes, it did. I looked pretty good and was pretty proud of that. I had not yet gone to Korea. It was just a few weeks after that that I was sent there.

How did you get over there?

There was a draft of about 80 of us that flew over. It took 5 or 6 days to get there. We stopped in Hawaii, Midway, Guam, Japan, then Korea.

Did you go as an individual replacement or did you go as part of a unit?

Part of what was called a replacement draft. When you got to Korea, they assigned you to a unit. I was sent to Able Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. This was in '52.

Where was that outfit operating at the time?

The Marines had moved from the west coast over to the east coast. Most of the fighting was taking place up near the 38th Parallel. There were a series of hills up there where the 1st and 5th Marines were. The 7th Marines were in reserve, as I recall. You've probably heard the names--Vegas, Carson, East Berlin, West Berlin, Hill 105, 107.

Yes, I'm familiar with the so-called Nevada Cities.

Anyway, I don't know if you know how it worked then. A corpsman would spend 6 or 7 months on the line. Then you were rotated back to a medical company--a med battalion. I was sent back to Easy Med. During the latter part of my tour I was sent up to Panmunjom.

What was that like?

They repatriated some prisoners and we medical people greeted and examined them there.

That was called "Little Switch."

Yes, yes. You're right. I had forgotten that. Then I went back to my unit at Easy Med and then back to the States, where I was discharged from the Navy for a short time. I was going to the University of Alabama at Birmingham for pharmacy school. Then I had another run-in with my father.

He was still at it. But you were bigger now and probably in better shape.

Yeah, that's true but I really didn't want any part of such an unhappy environment. So I reenlisted as a third class. I went to Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, TX. That was a terrible thing because it was kind of a backwoods kind of an organization. All anybody did was drink and I became a drunk. I went down to Mexico and got in trouble with the locals. I came back and got into a fight downtown Corpus Christi and had a court martial and was reduced in rank back to HN. I still had more than 5 years to go on that enlistment and there I was back to HN.

That court martial kind of woke me up. I stopped drinking and began studying and transferring around to various departments. This was 1953. Six years later I finally made first

class. I went to laboratory school in Bethesda for 14 months then went to sea on a destroyer, and then a destroyer tender. Then I went to the Research Lab in New London. I worked with a really great guy named George Bond.

You worked with George Bond?
I sure did.

He's a legend.
He was a legend even then. He and I really became good friends. I was kind of his right hand gofer. I did everything. Drove the cars and got the schedules all fixed up. I worked with him on the Deep Submergence Vehicle program. He had this great vision of living in a city under the sea.

The Sealab Project.
Yes. We got along really well. It was because of Dr. Bond that I went to MAT School, the administrative tech school at Portsmouth, VA. I was doing very well academically. I was number three in a class of 85.

You had straightened yourself, hadn't you?
Yes. And the sponsor in charge of the school decided that the top 10 percent of the class would apply for commission. And because I was number three, of course I was included. They gave me a package of papers to fill out. I took them back down to the administrative officer and said in essence, "This is ridiculous. There's no point in me applying for a commission with my horrible record." I had three captain's masts and one court martial. I had been busted. He said that it didn't matter. The officer in charge wanted everybody who was academically qualified to apply. So I filled out the papers. Then I took what they call the Officer Selection Battery. Then you took an all-day exam in the specifics of the medical department.

Anyhow, I took the exams and sent them all away. There's kind of a funny story about my interview. There was a board composed of a couple of captains, commanders, and three or four lieutenant commanders. I went in and sat down in a straight back chair in front of the board. When I went in and sat down, the senior member was looking through my service record. He looked up at me, then he'd look down and read another page, then look up at me. Then he said, "Sparks, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Sir, I was told to be here, and here I am."

"Well, okay, we'll go ahead with the interview."

And, of course, they did. I graduated from MAT School and still hadn't heard anything. I was on leave and was going to the pre-commissioning detail for USS *Enterprise*. She was brand new at the time and had just been launched at Newport News. Word came down that I was one of those selected for commission.

You must have been pretty surprised.
To say the least. The whole time I was in the service I kept looking over my shoulder wondering when they were going to catch up with me. But they never did.

So you were a new ensign at this point.

Yes. I was then assigned to the most horrible place they could ever send anybody, the Navy Medical School at Bethesda. I was assigned to what they called the Navy Medical Correspondence Division. This little unit administered all the correspondence courses that mostly reserve doctors took for reserve credit points. They had a captain there named Giaconda Rita Saraniero. They called her Gigi.

I've heard of her. What was her story?

She was the first female doctor from her medical school in New York City. She was the Italian woman of the year in New York City because of that, and one of the first female doctors in the Navy. Gigi was crazy.

In what way?

She was delusional and paranoid and felt that everybody was stupid except her, of course. She once said to me--and I'll never forget this quote--"Jonathan, you are not a physician. You are necessarily stupid." Now this was my new boss with whom I had to work.

How did the other physicians feel about her?

They would have nothing to do with her at all. She was incredibly independent and that made it very difficult for a young ensign. As an example, as the admin officer, I was responsible for the annual budget. The command would papers for us to fill out for our annual budget. And I would try to work with Gigi to get that done, but she was not forthcoming with any information. So I would try to pretty much stick with the budget from the previous year and make what changes I thought should be made. Then I would send it to her for her approval. She just held onto it and did nothing. I kept getting calls from the command asking where the budget information was. And I kept saying, "CAPT Sareniero's got it."

"Well, get it and send it in."

I then tried to do that but she wouldn't do it. So because there wasn't any budget submission, our budget for the year was zero. When I went in to tell this to Gigi, she said, "That's not a problem." She picked up the phone and called someone there at BUMED, who referred her to somebody in OPNAV, and they sent us some money. There was a lot of this weird stuff going on and circumventing the command irritated the hell out of them. It also put me in an untenable position because I was having to defend my boss in an indefensible situation.

The fact that she was in charge of this office--was this the result of being shunted off in this position so she couldn't do damage elsewhere?

Yes. It was a zero position.

Had she had previous patient treatment experience?

She had indeed. It wasn't so much that she was incompetent in patient care. It's just that she had no people skills whatsoever and was unable to get along with anyone. So they just kept shunting her off to lesser positions.

So it had nothing to do with the fact that she was a female physician.

No. She was just really bizarre. She had a really nice place in Georgetown. And she didn't drive. In her day, women didn't drive cars. And, of course, being from New York City, few people had to drive anyhow. So Gigi never learned to drive. She took cabs everywhere. But she was so demanding and so abusive to the cab drivers that if she called for a cab to come

pick her up, they wouldn't come. The building where we were was in the same place where the Naval School of Health Administration was. We were on the second floor of one wing. Gigi would call down to whoever the poor soul was that had the duty and get him to call a cab for her. Sometimes she'd get me to do it. But eventually, they would recognize my voice and they wouldn't come when I called either. Yes. She was pretty bad to everybody.

One day, she called me into her office and said something to me, and I didn't respond favorably. I may have snapped back at her. She got upset and said, "I want you to. . ." My desk was sitting in the middle of a whole bunch of other desks. There were Civil Service workers and corpsmen working there. She told me to get the big plastic trash can in the closet. "Now I want you to go back to your desk and take everything off the top of that desk and put it in the trash can and bring it in here to me."

So I did that. "Now I want you to go out and sit at your desk and you're not to talk to anyone or answer the phone, or do anything for the rest of the day but sit there."

What became of her?

She finally retired and went back to New York. She died about 8 or 10 years ago. But she had quite a reputation. Everybody in Washington knew her.

How did you eventually get out of there?

About this time, the Cuba flap started.

The missile crisis of '62.

Yes. I called a friend at BUMED and told him I'd be better off back with the Marines. Why not just send me back to Lejeune. A couple of weeks later I got orders but to Camp Pendleton to the 1st Marine Division. So I went out there and joined the 1st Med Battalion. I was there about 2 weeks when we mounted up and boarded a ship at San Diego, went through the Panama Canal, and headed to Cuba. It was kind of roundabout way to get to Cuba.

There we were lying about 5 miles off the Cuban coast ready to invade when they called the whole thing off.

What ship were you on?

Either the *Bexar* or the *Bayfield*. They were APAs.

What was your job with that unit?

I was the CO of a collecting and clearing company--Charlie Med.

What was the clearing company's function?

Each medical battalion assigned to either of the Marine divisions had five collecting and clearing companies. There was supposed to be one with each regiment. Your job was to be a field hospital like a MASH unit. We were prepared to land on the beaches along with the grunts. I had 12 physicians, 60 Marines, and about 90 hospital corpsmen.

After they called off the invasion, where did you go then?

We all went back to Camp Pendleton. I had gotten into trouble when we were in the Caribbean, too. I had been ashore in Kingston, Jamaica, got drunk, and created a public disturbance in a hotel. I got a letter of reprimand. When I got back to Pendleton, my boss there,

who was the CO of the 1st Medical Battalion, wasn't happy with me at all. So he sent me to an outfit called the 1st Hospital Company.

At that time there were two organizations. One was the 1st Hospital Company and the other was called 1st Separate Surgical Company. These two outfits were just on paper. They had never really existed, although there was equipment allotted for them--a lot of equipment. The 1st Hospital Company was a 100-bed hospital designed not to be with the Marine division but with the Force Troops--the support organization--supply, transportation, logistics people. They weren't really attached to the division but rather belonged to the organization called Force Troops or Force Support Groups (FSG). Each Marine division had one of these FSGs. But the Force Support Groups had a lot of trucks, supplies, warehouses, repair facilities, storage facilities, and that sort of thing. They supplied the ammunition for the artillery, petroleum and other lubricants, the food, and all of that to the division.

They were large in number. They were about maybe three or four thousand people in a Force Support Group. And the hospital company was designed to be their medical treatment facility.

So, they wouldn't go to battalion; they'd go to you.

Right. That's the way it was designed. But it was never used that way. But that was the plan. The 1st Separate Surgical Company was a larger organization. It was a 400-bed hospital. As the name would imply, its primary function was surgery. It was to be an intermediate medical treatment facility between theater of operations and the evac hospitals. To put in terms of Vietnam, there would be the station hospital at Danang, a place for the collecting and clearing company, the division medical units would send patients before they were sent back to Okinawa or to Japan or to Guam. The 1st Separate Surgical Company was designed to do just that--to be in a theater of operations and support, maybe not just one Marine division but may two or more much like we had in Vietnam. It too was never used. Other than me, the 1st Separate Surgical Company never had any personnel at all and was later disbanded as was the 1st Hospital Company. Those two entities no longer exist.

You say that they had their own supplies--tentage and surgical equipment?

Yes. It was stored in several warehouses at Pendleton. There was quite a lot of stuff. A 400-bed hospital and all the support it entailed was quite large.

So, it never got together as a unit. There were no exercises or anything?

That's right. It was there on paper and it existed. Nevertheless, it required some people to maintain the equipment. My job was to do this--make sure the supplies were current, discard outdated stuff, order replacement parts and pharmaceuticals, and that sort of thing.

You were sent to this unit as the CO?

Yes.

Did you have a staff to help you out?

Not in the Separate Surgical Company but I was also the CO of the 1st Hospital Company. Neither of these organizations amounted to anything. I think I had about 10 Marines and maybe 15 corpsmen and that's about it.

As I told you, I had gotten into trouble in Jamaica and the CO of the medical battalion had shunted me off to this nothing job. This was in early '63. The Marines decided to send the Hospital Company out to Twentynine Palms, which was where the commanding general of Force Troops was. This was done to get the Hospital Company out of 1st Marine Division's clutches. They had an ulterior motive. This would increase the number of personnel Force Troops could have and the amount of money they could get.

So, I packed up the Hospital Company and three other people and I--that's all the Marine division would give me--drove out to Twentynine Palms and once there, we built it up. I finally had about a hundred Marines and 75 or 80 hospital corpsmen. We went out on field maneuvers and supported the troops in the field. I did a lot of work there. I was there from '63 to '65.

What about medical personnel--physicians and dentists?

I had those too, but they were all sent over to the station hospital to work every day. I had no patient care at the Hospital Company. These doctors were assigned to me but they worked at the station hospital at Twentynine Palms. By the way, that's the way it's done everywhere. The medical battalions at Camp Lejeune and Camp Pendleton have a large number of physicians assigned to them but they all work at the Naval Hospital.

And they're only attached to the hospital company or medical battalion when they're ready to deploy.

Right. Or when you go out on field exercises. That's when I'd get the doctors to go with me so they could get some training.

In November of '65, we got orders to go to Vietnam.

What rank were you at that time?

I was lieutenant. We went to San Diego, boarded the ship. It was USS *Tulare* ( ). Our orders were to go to Chu Lai, South Vietnam and report to the commanding general of the 3rd Marine Division for duty. That was significant because when we got to Chu Lai, I had to off-load my jeep, and my first sergeant and I went looking for division headquarters. But the 3rd Division was in the process of moving out of Chu Lai and going up north of Danang. So there were just some residual units left. They had a bird colonel who was actually the G-4 for the 3rd Marine Division who would not only be my boss . . . He was a strange sort of fellow. He had never heard of a hospital company and wasn't aware that we were coming in country and didn't know who we were or what we were supposed to do. All he knew was that he was in the process of packing everything up and moving. He was dismissive. He said, "Well, go find a place to set up. And after you've set up, come back and see me."

So, the first sergeant and I drove around Chu Lai for a while and decided that the best place to be was right back where we had come in, kind of an LST landing ramp called a sand ramp. The Seabee battalion was maybe some 2,000 yards away from that right on the coast of the South China Sea. We found this neat little place on a promontory at a point overlooking the water and set up our hospital. I then went back to report in to this colonel to tell him we had set up the hospital but he was gone. There was no one there.

So, you were by yourself and all alone.

That's right. There were Marines there at the airstrip and they belonged to the air wing. And there were Seabees there who ran the sand ramp and built things. And there were a few 3rd

Marine Division infantry units around who provided perimeter security for the air strip but I had no boss and no one to report to and nothing to do.

I got a plane and went up to Danang to talk to the division surgeon up there. He told me that the 1st Marine Division was coming to Chu Lai from Okinawa. They were relieving the 3rd Marine Division, which had already left. He suggested that when the 1st Division got there, I report to him and find out what I was supposed to do.

I told him that I would do that but I really didn't belong to the division surgeon. I belonged to the Force Support Group. He didn't understand that so I just let it ride and went back to Chu Lai. We waited a couple of months and finally the 1st Division came in. I did talk to the division surgeon and we decided to have the Seabees help us build a hospital over by the air strip and we could provide the medical care for the air wing and the infantry units that were involved in perimeter support for the air strip. And that's what we did. For the next 7 or 8 months, we provided medical support for those people.

When you first got to Chu Lai and set up near the sand ramp . . .

We called the place "The Point."

So, it wasn't on the river but on the ocean.

That's right.

For several months thereafter, you say you had nothing to do. You had no physicians working there. In fact, you had nobody working there. Is that correct?

I did have physicians but I sent them to the medical battalion up in Danang. Some of them worked for me in Chu Lai but they went out on MEDCAP teams. I had five MEDCAP teams which I kept busy. They went out every day. But that's the only work we did. We had incoming fire from the North Vietnamese but it never caused any problems and nobody was ever hit.

When you set up at the point--at the sand ramp--what did the place look like once you got it set up?

It was a beautiful place on a little promontory about 20 feet from the high tide point on a little hill which was flat on the top. I had about 25 GP tents set up in sections and rows. There were living tents for the troops and tents for the hospital itself--wards, the surgery, admissions, and that kind of thing. We had a warehouse and a motor pool. We had a shower unit and a laundry. Then we kicked back and waited for business.

But most of the business went up to the 3rd Med Battalion.

Right. And we got hardly anything. As a matter of fact, there's a little sidelight to that. I had a doctor I used on a MEDCAP. He was from Boston. His wife was in the family that owned and made sailboats--Sailfish and Sunfish. I talked to him. He talked to his wife, and she talked to her father who said that he would be glad to donate a sailboat to the hospital company. He could get it to the West Coast but didn't know how to get it to Vietnam. I told him that if they could get it to the Tracy Army Medical Depot in California, I'd get it to Vietnam.

I contacted some Army Medical Service Corps friends in Tracy and told them they would be getting a strange set of boxes from Boston addressed to the 1st Hospital Company. I asked if they could repackage it and re-mark it, and send it to me. And they did that. One day we got a

call from the Seabees at the sand ramp telling me these LSTs had come in with several big boxes addressed to the hospital company. We went down and brought them back. When we opened the boxes there was a sailboat--a Sunfish. We put it all together and the doctor spent much of his free time teaching people how to sail. I had a GP tent all to myself equipped with a refrigerator and a bar. I had a stereo set up and an open reel tape recorder. I'd sit at my little patio behind my tent listening to music and drinking scotch, and watch them sail around.

Sounds like pretty good duty.

Let me tell you. When the 1st Medical Battalion came in, they had doctor commanders and captains, and they were extremely resentful of all of this. They didn't like this at all. But we worked it out. As soon as they got in, we built a new place for me, and soon we were doing our share of patient care at Chu Lai.

Did you join up with the 1st Med Bat?

No. We were a separate organization altogether so we didn't join them. We had separate physical facilities.

How far away were they?

About 4 miles. We were close to the air strip, to the Marine aviation squadrons.

So that's the way you divvied up the patients?

Pretty much. The medical battalion was better equipped. They had four operating rooms and I only had two. So they took care of most of the surgery. We did some of it. They did the battle casualty trauma things and we did pretty much the rest of it--internal medicine, orthopedic problems. We did some surgery. I had two surgeons and some OR techs. We did some work. Let's face it, as I described to you, it was a bastard organization and no one really knew what the hell to do with it.

What was the chain of command for you?

I answered to the division surgeon and to the G-4 at the 1st Marine Division. The reason for that was there was no Force Support Group people there at Chu Lai. They were all at Danang, too. We did the best we could with what we had.

As far as equipment, did you have x-ray machines and all that kind of stuff?

Oh, yes. I had two x-ray machines. I had autoclaves and anesthesia machines and lights and tables.

So you were really equipped to do a lot more work than what you were getting.

Absolutely. We ended up really being in support of the medical battalion and taking some of the load off them.

So when you weren't treating patients, you did MEDCAPs.

Yes. The infantry units had their own civilian assistance programs going. They were called CAP programs. They went out with about 10 or 12 Marines and did things like helping people building things--sewage and sanitation. The medical or MEDCAP people would go and take care of the sick, lame, and lazy. Many times, they would bring people back to the hospital--

women and kids--mostly for more definitive care. They provided immunizations and tried to teach them about clean drinking water, first aid, childbirth, and that sort of thing. Usually, we'd send one truck and one jeep, one doctor, five corpsmen, and five Marines. The Marines were there to drive the trucks and serve as riflemen to protect them in case they were assaulted, which happened quite often. I lost two doctors, two corpsmen, and four Marines who were killed.

Going on MEDCAPs?
Oh yeah. It was a very dangerous kind of a thing to do.

Do you remember the doctors' names?
One was named Spencer. (Could it have been John Saunders? Can't find a physician named Spencer on my KIA list) I can't remember the other man's name. This happened over the period of a year that I was there.

I think there were six doctors killed during the war so you accounted for two of them there.
Only six were killed? That's amazing considering what kind of exposed positions they were in.

Did you ever ever go out on any of the MEDCAPs yourself?
Oh, yes. Many.

How did you decide where to go?
We got information from Marines. They had been out in the area and knew where things were and the relative disposition of enemy troops and that kind of thing. Where they would send their patrols, we would go in after them. We almost always went to villages. At first, I went along frequently until the MEDCAP groups were trained and knew what to do.

Are there any of those MEDCAP missions that you remember for any reason?
Nothing now really leaps off the page. However, I remember one incident back at the hospital company after we had set up in our new hospital and were seeing patients. I was sitting on the front steps with a master chief hospital corpsman. He and I were sitting on the front steps during a lull period smoking cigarettes and shooting the breeze. We looked down the road, which was a very straight road that went down to the MSR [Main Supply Route]. It was maybe a third of a mile from the MSR to where we were sitting. And we saw this figure walking down the middle of the road. At that distance, we couldn't tell who it was, just something human moving down the road toward us. We just sat there continuing to smoke and talk.

As the figure got closer, we could see that it was a woman. And she was holding something in her arms. Eventually, we could see that she had been badly burned. Her face was . . . She looked pretty bad. So we jumped up and ran down the road toward her. What she was holding was an infant wrapped in some sort of brown cloth. The infant and the cloth had been burned pretty badly. We picked them up and carried them to the hospital.

We had a hell of a time getting this baby out of the woman's arms. She wouldn't turn it loose. Finally, they got the baby from her but it was dead, and had been for some time. The woman didn't know that. She didn't recover either. She was there about 3 days and finally died.

What had happened to her?

They had been napalmed. It was an accidental napalm drop. And they just happened to be on the road walking when a plane dropped napalm on them. That gave me a whole new perspective on the Vietnam War. It sure altered my feelings on the whole thing.

How had you felt up to that point?

I had been all right with it. I had volunteered to go to Vietnam and thought I was doing what was best for my country. I was a career sailor and that's where I belonged. I knew what to do and how to do it. But that incident kind of changed my mind. I no longer saw any point in the war and began listening to more and more news reports about protesters here in the States.

This was in '66?

Yes. Actually, this was still pretty early in the war. There was a general--GEN Lewis Walt. He was the head Marine there. He was interviewed once by a female reporter. I'll never forget what he said. The reporter asked him how he felt about the protesters and draft dodgers, flag-burning, and student protests. He said something to the effect that I abhor that. I think it's terrible. I wish it wasn't happening. However, I'm over here fighting to defend their right to do just that. Well, that's the way I feel about it now. I think it's all right that they protested and I'm glad they did. Had I been of that age, I would probably have been protesting too.

I usually ask this question last but since we're on the subject . . . It's been over 35, almost 40 years since all of that happened. Do you ever think about it very much?

Yes. I do. I don't want to come off as some sort of radical but I'm really anti-war. This is a terrible thing to say but as I look back on my experiences in the military, I went and did what I was supposed to do both in Korea and Vietnam. I was prepared to invade Cuba and earlier in my career, the Marines landed in Lebanon. Later, I was aboard a ship that was involved in the Quemoy, Matsu incident when the Chinese were threatening to invade Taiwan. I look back on all of that and think it was all pointless. I don't think we accomplished a damn thing. We certainly didn't win a war in Korea or Vietnam. We certainly didn't win in Lebanon or in Cuba. None of it did anything to alter the tension between the mainland Chinese and the islanders. I just don't see any good that came out of all that turmoil and death and blood and money. Sorry to be so down but . . .

Don't apologize. I think when you see war up close, it changes the way you feel about things.

Bush can say whatever he wants about how it was a good thing how we went in and invaded Iraq but I don't see the point in doing it. I deeply question whether the United States ought to be the world's policeman but that's what we've been since 1945 and I guess that's going to continue. Unfortunately, I've come to a conclusion, and I find it difficult to live with. My conclusion is that we Americans love war. I'm speaking generally.

In your own experience, do you think it was your encounter with that woman and child that made you see war differently?

I think it was the catalyst. But I think I had begun to develop an unease about it all as far back as Korea, especially when I came home from Korea. I came home on a troopship--140 corpsmen and about 2,000 Marines. When we came into San Francisco under the Golden Gate

Bridge, we docked at Mare Island, there were two people there to meet us--two Navy seamen, line handlers. That was it. No bands, no banners, nothing in the newspaper. I got to the San Francisco Airport, got on a plane, and went home to Birmingham, AL. No one said a damn word about the Army, the military, the Marines, Korea, anything. There was no talk about it in the city; there was nothing in the newspapers.

What was your experience coming home from Vietnam?

It was almostly exactly the same. I flew in from Okinawa right into the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro. My wife met me there. We hugged and kissed, got in the car, and drove home. That was about it. There was no fanfare about any of it. I then went to work at the new Naval Hospital at Long Beach. Almost half our patients were Vietnam casualties. I was the patient affairs officer there. One of my jobs was to try and serve as liaison between the community and the hospital in terms of the casualties. I was involved with the Dodgers and the Angels and Hollywood trying to get tours and get celebrities to come visit them and get baseball tickets.

My point is that I had some awareness of how citizens felt about the Marine casualties. It was mostly indifference. "Oh, yeah, I see you've got 200 Marines. Well, we'll send you over 10 free baseball tickets for the bleachers." That's the kind of response I got. It was very off-putting and just adding more fuel to the anti-war fire.

How long were you at Long Beach?

Eighteen months. Then I was sent to Guam. There was a naval hospital still there but it was really quite small, only about 200 beds. They wanted to use Guam as an intermediate hospital for the Vietnam wounded, a place where they could stabilize them and do some more definitive surgery, and maybe provide them with orthopedic appliances before they sent them back to the U.S. They had taken over what had been a civilian barracks and converted it into hospital wards and into surgery and ancillary facilities. It became a 500-bed hospital. I was the administrative officer there. The main hospital was about 3 miles away up in the hills. I had a crew of about 22 other Medical Service Corps officers. I was a lieutenant commander at the time. I stayed there for about a year running that hospital.

When did you retire?

I retired in '76. I was CO of the 1st Medical Battalion at Camp Pendleton. I was right back there again.

What did you do after you retired?

My kids were all grown and gone and my wife worked. I was a beach bum for a year going up and down Southern California beaches, drinking wine coolers, smoking cigars, reading books, and letting my hair grow. I even grew a beard.

I finally decided to go to school. I had never been to school. I had only gone up till 9th grade before joining the Navy. And I didn't have any formal schooling while I was in the Navy. I'll never know how I retired as a lieutenant commander either but somehow it happened.

You really surprised yourself a lot, didn't you?

Yes I did. Anyhow, I decided to go to school. First I went to community college there in the San Diego area and then went to San Diego State and the University of California at San

Diego. I went to school for almost 7 years. I loved it and thought it was terrific. I got a 3.97 grade point average!

Then I got a job teaching. I taught in the community college I had started at in San Diego County. I taught English and remedial reading. Then my wife died in '93 so I sold my house and moved to Florida. My mother and sisters live here in Orlando and that's where I've been since.

What do you do with your time these days?

Not a hell of a lot. I'm a lot more sedentary than I'd like to be. I've got a lot of medical problems and that kind of limits my physical activity. I'm a big opera buff. There's a little opera company here in Orlando. I go around and speak to groups and individuals and try to solicit money and support for the opera association. I help them build sets. I'm also a part-time woodworker. That's my hobby. I build furniture and sets for the opera presentations. I'm also a marksmen. I belong to a shooting organization and go two or three times a week and practice shooting pistols.

What do you shoot?

I shoot both a .22 long rifle target pistol--a Ruger, and a Glock .40 caliber.

I belong to an organization called the North-South Skirmish Association. We shoot the muzzle-loaders.

Do you? Great. That sounds like a lot of fun. When I shoot my .22 target pistol I have four magazines of 10 rounds each so usually I'm standing there shooting all 40 rounds. It would take you 3 days to shoot 40 rounds!

Pretty close to it. But they make big holes.

When I was with the Marines, I always qualified with the 1911 pistol.

I've got one and I'm still trying to learn how to shoot the thing. I think if you can master the .45 automatic, you can shoot anything.

Let me suggest something. The first thing to do is replace the sights. Get the three-dot sights.

I'll do that. Thank you for spending time with me and sharing your thoughts.